

Iowan's rare insight improves health communication

By Lilian Hu*

You don't have to work in public health or health care to make a difference in health literacy. Just ask Doug Kapp. The 56-year-old Iowan is a volunteer member of the document review board at Finley Hospital in Dubuque, Iowa.

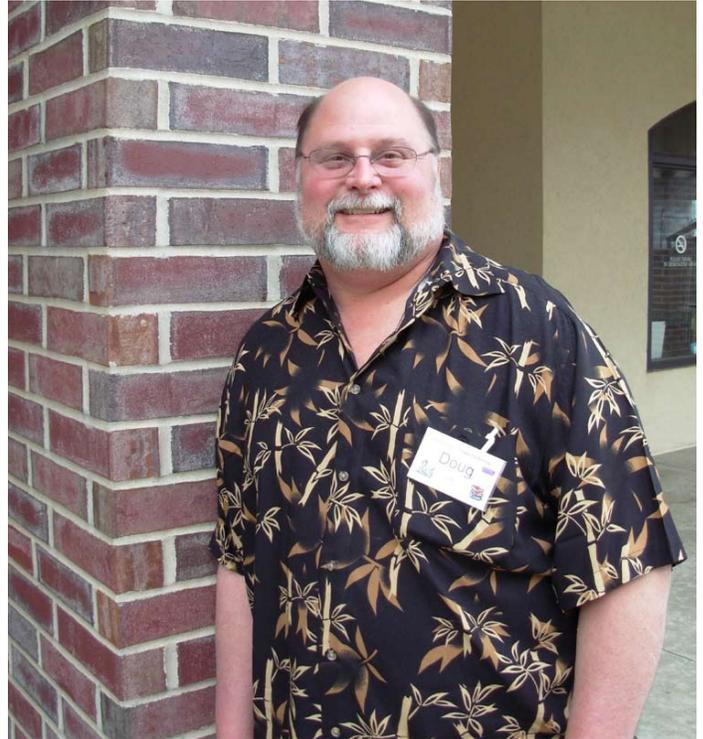
The only lay person on the board, Doug couldn't read until age 40. Now he makes sure Finley's written materials are readable for someone with limited literacy skills.

"It is important to have a lay person's perspective when it comes to documents," Doug says. "I think public health and the health care system are beginning to realize that."

Doug's struggle with reading is not uncommon. About 30 million adults in the U.S. are functionally illiterate. What makes Doug's story different is that he's willing to share it to help others.

Doug was a truck driver for John Deere for 20 years. Unable to read, he used landmarks to remember his routes. When Iowa required commercial truck drivers to pass a 300-question driver's license test, Doug decided it was time to get help.

He started by studying three times a week at a local college. In 1993, his tutor invited him to a conference in Des Moines. The gathering was hosted by New Readers of Iowa, an adult literacy group active in health literacy advocacy. Doug's involvement with the organization eventually led to his work with Finley Hospital.



As someone who learned to read as an adult, Doug Kapp now helps create health literacy friendly environments.

Before learning to read, Doug's experience with public health and the health care system was frustrating. He noticed that many documents are often written at a 12th grade or college reading level. But the problem isn't limited to health care, Doug says. Even journalists—people who are trained to make things easier to understand—need to improve the way they present health information.

Besides finding written materials confusing, Doug says that communicating with his doctors was also difficult. "When I asked my doctor to explain something, I got the information in the

same way it was written,” Doug said. “I still wouldn’t understand, and didn’t want him to explain it a second time.”

Like others with limited reading skills, the problem would get worse when Doug hid his condition from others. “To avoid reading, I would tell people I lost my glasses, the print was too small, or that I’d look at it later,” Doug said. “No one caught on that I could not read.”

The more time Doug spends with public health and health care workers, the more he notices

In turn, this costs the system more resources and money.

Although there is plenty of room for improvement, Doug says that health literacy has gained greater support from people in all fields and professions. In fact, hospitals such as Iowa Health System in Des Moines have opened their doors to Doug and other members of New Readers of Iowa. Sometimes they request document reviews or a simple hospital walkthrough to see if their signage can be improved.

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- Doug Kapp

“There are a lot of us out there working for an environment that is more health literacy friendly,” Doug says. “It’s important to work with people from different

many do not realize the extent of the problem of low health literacy. He teaches them to recognize and know how to work with patients with low health literacy skills.

“A patient at Finley used to make the staff so mad because they thought he purposely did not follow the directions they gave him,” Doug says. “I told the staff to read the information to the patient instead. They did and then he was better.”

One of Doug’s biggest challenges is convincing hospital staff that making documents and signage easier to read actually saves time and money. “Management looks at the dollar,” Doug says. “If patients can’t read or understand the signs, they’re going to miss appointments. Then they lose patients.”

This also applies to public health. Complicated forms and health information prevent public health clients from getting the help they need.

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Doug, who grew up in Cedar Rapids currently lives in Dubuque with his wife. To request a site visit by Doug or other New Readers of Iowa, visit Plain & Simple: A health literacy project for Iowa at www.idph.state.ia.us/health_literacy. Just click on “Contact Us.”

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